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THE RELEVANCE OF RHETORIC TO COMPOSITION.

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RHETORICIANS HAVE MAINTAINED THAT A SKILL IS ACQUIRED BY STUDYING THEORY, IMITATING THE ACTS OF OTHERS, AND PRACTICING REPEATEDLY. ALTHOUGH ALL THREE ACTIVITIES FALL WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE COMPOSITION COURSE, THEORY AND IMITATION, IN MOST INSTANCES, RECEIVE THE MOST CLASSROOM TIME. IDEALLY, THESE TWO SHOULD BE PRESENTED IN COMBINATION THROUGH A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO "COMPOSED TEXTS." RHETORIC IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COMPOSITION COURSE CAN BEST BE DEFINED AS "THE ART THAT GUIDES JUDICIOUS CHOICES OF AVAILABLE MEANS OF COMMUNICATING WITH AN AUDIENCE." THE PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THIS DEFINITION IMPLY THAT TEACHERS MUST HELP STUDENTS BECOME AWARE OF AVAILABLE MEANS--OF DISCOVERING SOMETHING TO SAY AND WAYS IN WHICH THEY CAN ORGANIZE THEIR KNOWLEDGE. FURTHERMORE, STUDENTS MUST HAVE A SET OF CRITERIA WITH WHICH TO MAKE INTELLIGENT AND WISE CHOICES FROM AMONG THE AVAILABLE SUBJECT MATTERS AND FORMS. THESE CRITERIA INVOLVE A CONCERN WITH THE TYPE OF DISCOURSE ONE IS COMPOSING, ITS SUBJECT MATTER, THE AUDIENCE, AND THE WRITER HIMSELF. LASTLY, TEACHERS OF RHETORIC MUST HELP STUDENTS BECOME AS AWARE OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD AS THEY ARE OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR DISCOURSE. WHEN THIS OCCURS, TEACHERS ARE NOT ONLY TRAINING STUDENTS IN RHETORIC, BUT ALSO GIVING THEM A LIBERAL EDUCATION. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "KENTUCKY ENGLISH BULLETIN," VOL. 17 (1967-68), 3-12.) (MM)

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THE RELEVANCE OF RHETORIC TO COMPOSITION*

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Here we go again. One more ride on the merry-go-round, with yet another teacher spinning out his theories about how to teach composition. Why do we tolerate it? Well, I suppose it is because we have had just enough failures in our teaching of composition and just enough minor triumphs that we are hopeful that the next *guru* who comes along will pass on just enough of a magic formula that we might increase the number of our successes and diminish the number of our frustrations. I myself latch on to each new issue of *College Composition and Communication* with all the avidity of a middle-aged matron buying the latest concoction of beeswax and sorghum from Helena Rubinstein. Someone, for heaven's sake, must have the beautifying formula for all those ugly themes I have been receiving in Freshman English.

So as not to create the impression of utter cynicism about this whole business, however, I should confess that I have picked up a number of valuable suggestions about composition from reading the journals, attending conferences, and talking with my colleagues. I am still not ready to proclaim that I teach composition superlatively well, but I don't hesitate to confess that I teach it much better now than I did even as recently as five years ago. What has made the difference, I think, is that now at least I know what I am doing. For many years I just thrashed about in the classroom—and developed an enormous callous on the index finger of my right hand from wielding a vindictive red pencil. And what has helped me greatly to find out what I was doing was the quite accidental discovery of a discipline called rhetoric.

I use the word *accidental* advisedly. I had gone through four years of high school, four years of undergraduate work, and the first stage of my graduate program without ever hearing a word about rhetoric. I had seen the word *rhetoric,* of course, in the titles of textbooks and courses, and I had heard the term in such derogatory expressions as "There's more rhetoric than substance to that man's utterances." But of rhetoric as a discipline with a 2000-year history I had heard not a peep. Rather ironically, rhetoric, which had its origin as a rationale for oral discourse, had for all

* Delivered as the principal address at the fall meeting of the KCTE, Lexington, November 10, 1967.

those years been speechless as far as I was concerned. Then one day when I was browsing through the stacks of the library I took down from the shelves a calfskin-covered volume bearing the unappetizing title *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. It was a copy of one of the more than a hundred editions of a rhetoric book by Hugh Blair that had been widely used in British and American schools during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I started to nibble at the pages, then I bit off big chunks, and before I knew it I was hooked.

I have had a number of good trips through the realms of gold since that day, and although there were times when I freaked out, I came back from each trip feeling a little more knowledgeable about a very rich heritage and considerably more confident in the freshman classroom. If you can stand a few more whirls on the merry-go-round, I'll pump up the old calliope and play some fetching tunes for you. Maybe if you find the tunes infectious enough, you will be able to tolerate a few more go-arounds.

The ancient rhetoricians maintained that one acquired a skill by one or a combination of three means—by a study of theory or precepts; by the study and imitation of the performance of others; and by repeated practice of the skill. Reflection on our own experience is enough to confirm the validity of this claim. Most of us learned our native language through a combination of imitation and practice. Later on, we reinforced—or, maybe, confounded—that accomplishment by studying the grammar of our language in a systematic way. If we have acquired any manual skill, like bowling or tennis or knitting, we probably acquired it mainly through watching others and then going through the motions ourselves. What usually happens is that after we have achieved a measure of competence in some skill, we seek to improve, refine, extend that competence by a study of theory or principles.

Rhetoric as it was taught in the ancient schools usually embraced all three activities—theory, imitation, and practice. Schools and textbooks of rhetoric were distinguished from one another partly by which of these three activities received the greater emphasis. I am sure that if we were to investigate the composition course as it is taught at various schools and colleges, one of the ways in which we could classify them would be according to whether they put the primary emphasis on precepts or on imitation or on practice.

Most freshman programs in which students read literary texts and are asked to write five or six papers in response to that reading are examples of programs which teach the skill by exercising the students in the skill. Almost no classroom time is spent instructing

the students in how to compose an essay; the only instruction in writing that the students get is contained in the corrections and comments that the teacher makes on the graded paper. If the freshman course is organized around an anthology of expository essays, the emphasis is probably on learning by imitation. In such courses, classroom time is spent analyzing essays for form and content; students are then asked to write a theme modelled on the readings that have been studied in the classroom. It would be hard today to find a freshman course in which the primary emphasis would be on theory, but there was a time, even as recently as the nineteenth century, when the emphasis in the classroom was primarily, if not exclusively, on the theory of writing. It is inconceivable that anyone ever acquired the skill of writing by a study of theory alone without any observation of someone's practice and without practicing the skill oneself. But when one looks at classroom texts like Aristotle's *Rhetoric* or Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, one sees that these men were as much interested in teaching their students something *about* composing as they were in teaching them *how* to compose. *They* recognized some value in the study of rhetoric as a humanistic pursuit, quite apart from its practical value, and their hope was, I suppose, that by exposing students to the rationale of composition, they might motivate some of their students to want to *learn* to write.

It would be safe to say that one of three situations prevails in composition courses in our modern schools: some instructors teach no rhetoric whatsoever; some instructors teach a great deal of rhetoric; and some instructors—perhaps the majority of them—teach rhetoric but are not aware that they are teaching it. So by talking about the relevance of rhetoric for composition, I may have something for everybody today. Those who have been consciously teaching rhetoric all along can say, "Oh, what a good boy am I!" Those who have never taught rhetoric at all can murmur, "Well, I'm glad I never had to teach *that* stuff!" And those Monsieur Jourdains who have been teaching rhetoric all along and didn't know it can exclaim, "Look, ma, no hands!"

Although theory, imitation, and practice all fall within the province of the composition course, most of the *practice* in composition will necessarily have to be done outside the classroom. There are a few instances of workshop courses in writing in which students spend the entire classroom time writing, with the teacher circulating around the room answering specific questions or stopping occasionally to give a student some suggestion about his development, organization, or phrasing; but such courses are rare indeed. So most

of the practice in writing in our schools is done on the student's own time at home. Classroom time then will be occupied with theory or imitation or a combination of the two. What the ideal combination of these two approaches is I would not venture to say, but I would suggest that it is more fruitful to work with a combination of these two approaches rather than with an exclusive concentration on one or the other. We should keep in mind that composition is a synthetic process, a process of putting parts together into a coherent whole. Learning through imitation is largely an analytic process, a process of breaking a whole down into its parts, much like taking a clock apart to see what makes it tick. Hopefully there will be some carry-over from the analytic process to the synthetic process. The painless way to teach students something about rhetoric is to lead them in a close investigation of an already composed text so that they can discover rhetorical principles inductively. But you can teach them something about the rhetoric of the composed piece only if you approach the text rhetorically. You are never going to teach them anything about rhetoric if the discussion never goes beyond a consideration of the content or meaning of the piece being scrutinized. In other words, the discussion must go beyond a concern for the *what* to a concern for the *how* and the *why*. Before I knew anything about rhetoric, my classroom discussions on an assigned essay took one of two courses: either I spent the entire period just trying to get the class to see what the author was saying or I spent the entire period engaged in a glorious bull-session with the class—and usually when that happened we got miles away from the text before the class was twenty minutes along and while the bell for the end of class was still ringing I would say something like, "Oh, by the way, for next Friday I'd like you to write a 500-word theme on the subject of our discussion today." Needless to say, I continued to draw my pay each month for services rendered.

Well, how does one approach a text rhetorically? That question gets us down to the heart of the matter. I might start out by proposing one of a number of valid definitions of rhetoric. I select this particular definition because it is the one that best enables me to demonstrate the relevance of rhetoric to composition. Here is my stipulative definition: *rhetoric is the art that guides judicious choices of available means of communicating with an audience.* That rather vague, general definition has a number of shortcomings—note, for instance, that the definition carries no notion that we are dealing with an activity that uses verbal symbols—but the sense of this definition will sharpen up as I go on.

The key word in my definition is *choices*. The term *choices* gets

us to the essence of rhetoric, in much the same way that the term *probability* gets us to the essence of the art of fiction. Where there are no choices to be made, we have moved out of the province of art into the province of science. Science deals in choices only in the stage of hypothesis; but once the rule or the law or the truth is discovered there are no more choices to be made in that particular area of inquiry. At that point, science can no longer say, "I'll take the high road; you take the low road," because now there is only *one* road.

Two other notions are implicit in my definition. First of all, rhetoric is conceived of as a means-end art. This is an art then that will be vitally concerned with studying cause-and-effect relationships or antecedent-consequent relationships—*this* will produce *that* or *this* will follow from *that*. Secondly, the definition implies that rhetoric is a *practical* art rather than a speculative art (like metaphysics) or a productive art (like poetics). Rhetoric then will be primarily concerned with an optimum way of *doing* or *acting*.

What are the practical consequences, for our teaching, of the notions implicit in my definition? Well, for one thing, our teaching will have to be concerned with making students aware of the available means. For another thing, if rhetoric is an art of making judicious choices, we shall have to give our students a set of criteria for making the most judicious choices. And lastly, if rhetoric is concerned with the efforts produced by a discourse, we shall be occupied with making our students as discerning about the world outside of them as they are about themselves and their discourse.

The task of making our students aware of the available means for effecting a purpose consists of helping them to discover something to say, of acquainting them with the various ways of organizing what they have discovered, and of apprising them of the various linguistic resources for expressing what they have discovered and arranged. One of the things we are coming to recognize is that invention is the crucial difficulty that our students have with writing. Faced with an assigned topic, our students are rendered inarticulate because they do not have anything to say, or *think* they do not have anything to say, by way of developing that topic. There are a number of reasons for that poverty of notional resources. First of all, by the natural course of things, the teenager does not yet have sufficient acquaintance with the world of phenomena and ideas—although I submit that as a result of exposure to the electronic media they have more of an acquaintance than the members of my generation did when they were teenagers. What the modern teenager's ignorance amounts to really is that he is not aware of how much he does know, and our task as teachers is to lead him to an awareness

of how much he really does know. Another reason for the teenager's relative poverty of ideas is that often he has not read enough. More than ever before, books have to compete for his attention with television and music. Being the most non-verbal of the arts, music does not deal with ideas at all, and consequently it contributes to the affective maturity of the hearer but contributes very little to his cognitive maturity. Because television makes use of verbal symbols, it can deal with ideas, but as Marshall McLuhan has been pointing out, there is a vast difference between words operating in the dimension of sound and words operating in the dimension of space. There is a great deal of truth to McLuhan's slogan that the medium is the message. Unquestionably, modern youth, under the influence of the aural-visual media, are perceiving the word and structuring their knowledge of it much differently than we print-oriented teachers do. Not only do these teenagers have difficulty translating ideas they have gained from the aural-visual media into the graphic media, but they are unacquainted with whole patches of ideas that cannot be, or have not been, treated in the electronic media.

There are some things we teachers can do to help our students with this problm of invention. For one thing, we can set them to reading, on a level and to an extent that many of them are not used to. One justification certainly of our assigning them more outside reading than can be dealt with in the classroom is simply that we want to fill up their reservoirs of ideas. Another device that I have found useful in helping students to discover something to say is the topics, a technique that the classical rhetoricians devised for probing a subject to discover possible ways of developing it. The topics are really epistemological devices, formulated from observations of the characteristic ways in which the human mind thinks, and I can attest that they do help the otherwise paralyzed student to generate lines of development. The topics can be used not only as an aid for the synthetic process of composition but also as a handle for analyzing essays that have already been composed. The most productive of the common topics are Definition, Comparison, Relationship, and Testimony. I do not have time here to explain these topics or to show how they can be used in the classroom, but if you are interested in this system, I direct your attention to the article "Looking for an Argument" in the January, 1953 issue of *College English* for an account of how four teachers at the College of the University of Chicago used the topics in their composition classes, and to Mark Ashin's topical analysis of Madison's *Federalist, No.* 10 in the October, 1953 issue of *College English.* A modern variant of this ancient inventional aid is the method of pre-writing that Professor D. Gordon

Rohman has been using in experimental classes at Michigan State University and that James McCrimmon has adopted in the latest edition of his rhetoric text *Writing with a Purpose.* In his article "Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process" in the May, 1965 issue of *College Composition and Communication,* Professor Rohman describes how he made use of journal-writing, of analogy, and of techniques derived from the discipline of religious meditation to help his students to discover ideas and ways of structuring those ideas.

I have been talking about how we might lead our students to become aware of only one kind of available means for effecting a purpose—namely, the discovery of the matter which will figure in the composing process. I could go on to talk about how we lead our students to an awareness of other available means, such as the ways of selecting and arranging their material and the various lexical and syntactical resources for expressing what they have discovered and organized. But with time's winged chariot at my back, I pass on to the second of the services we can render for our students, if we mean to operate rhetorically.

The second of those services is to provide our students with a set of criteria for making the most judicious choices from among the available means. Rhetoric establishes a number of reference-points to help the speaker or writer make choices from among the available strategies of matter and form. These are the principal reference-points for making judicious decisions:

(1) The kind of discourse in which one is engaged.

Just as in imaginative literature certain demands of matter and form are made on the author by the genre in which he is engaged—lyric, sonnet, satire, familiar essay, short story—so in non-fictional prose certain demands are made on the author by the kind of discourse in which he is engaged—exposition, argumentation, description. Closely allied to this is the criterion of purpose. Is his general purpose to inform, to persuade, to move, or to entertain his audience?

(2) The subject matter about which one is writing.

Consideration of subject matter will determine how much the writer needs to inform himself about the matter before he can begin to write; will force him to determine what his attitude toward his subject matter is; will help him set the tone of his discourse; and will force him to delimit the subject to fit the limitations of time or space set for him.

(3) The audience to whom the discourse is directed.

Audience is often the chief determinant of the means chosen to effect one's end. This consideration forces the student to ascertain his audience and to attune himself to their frequency or attune them to his frequency. I shall have something more to say about audience in my next section.

(4) The competencies and personality of the speaker or writer.

This criterion is tied up with Aristotle's *ethos,* the ethical appeal—with the image of himself that the speaker or writer wants to project in order to inspire the confidence and trust of his audience. This consideration will force the student to know himself so that his reach will not exceed his grasp and so that the image he projects will not work against the other means he has elected to effect his purpose.

These criteria or reference-points, as you can see, set up a series of mutually influencing relationships between the writer, his discourse, and his audience. And this is what rhetoric is all about really. In any kind of verbal communication, there is an *I,* a *you,* and an *it* involved—the transmitter, the receiver, and the message. Rhetoric helps us to make the adjustments within and among the *I,* the *you,* and the *it* to ensure the maximum efficiency of the communication.

The third service I suggested we could render in the classroom if we want to operate as teachers of rhetoric is to make our students as aware of the external world as they are of themselves. Rhetorical discourse is a transitive activity, an activity that has its terminus in a particular effect on a particular audience in a particular situation at a particular point of time. All of these external considerations constitute what I. A. Richards calls the "'universe of discourse," a context that imposes its own set of demands and limitations on the speaker or writer and on his text. In the natural evolution toward maturity, the adolescent years represent the period when the young are turned in on themselves. This is the solipsistic season when young people are absorbed with themselves—with their thoughts and feelings, their attitudes and values, their aspirations and capacities. By the time they reach high school, we must begin to turn them outward again, as they had been in those years of infancy when they were discovering the wonders of this world. But now as they approach adulthood, their exploration of the world about them must become more refined, more discriminating, more sophisticated. It is not the province of rhetoric, of course, to give them that sophisti-

cated awareness. That is the province of all those subject-matter courses they take—history, geography, literature, the social and physical sciences. But by treating of discourse in terms of that external world, we make them acutely aware of how necessary it is to deepen their knowledge of the external world if they are to function effectively as social creatures. So we begin to turn them away from an exclusive concern with creative writing, those exercises in self-expression, to those more objective modes of expository writing, where the primary concern is not the self but the message and the receivers. The receivers of the message are human beings like themselves, and if the students are to communicate and cooperate with those fellow-creatures, they must get to know them better. They must learn how to trigger off and subdue the emotions of an audience, how to appeal to their reason, and how to move their wills. It is this kind of manipulation of our fellowmen that Kenneth Burke has in mind when he defines rhetoric as "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols." When we bring our students to this level of sophisticated contact with the universe of discourse we are no longer just giving them a rhetorical training; we are giving them a liberal education. That is the kind of humanistic orientation that men like Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian tried to give to their rhetoric course, and that is the kind of dividend our school systems lost when they sold off their remaining stocks in rhetoric to the lowest bidder at the beginning of this century.

All of this that I have been outlining for you may strike you as being frightfully complicated, systematic, and constrictive. And in a sense it is; it certainly demands more knowledge and know-how than most of us have been given in our college English courses. But the very systematic nature of rhetoric is just the sort of thing that can give student writers the competence and the confidence that can make them articulate. I am sorry that because of the limitations of time I have had to keep this exposition of the relevance of rhetoric to composition on a general level.

Recently in addressing a convention of elementary-school teachers in Louisville I proposed just the opposite theme. Because they were dealing with children who exist in what Alfred North Whitehead designates as the "stage of romance," I urged these teachers to exercise their pupils in free creative expression, with a minimum of directive and corrective interference from the teacher. In terms of Whitehead's spiral curriculum, our high school and college students occupy one or other of the next two successive stages —the stage of precision or the stage of generalization, and for the

kind of training that should take place during these two stages, rhetoric can be a helpful discipline.

Well, you have been marvelously patient about riding my hobby-horse on the merry-go-round, but by now many of you must be ready to cry out. "Stop the whirl, I want to get off." So I will stop the carousel before you become too dizzy and allow you to dismount and walk once again in a straight line. Why do I insist so on going round and round? I know as well as you do that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. I suppose it is because one of the lessons rhetoric has taught me is that situations and audiences being what they are, one can rarely go directly to the point. The proposition, "All men are mortal," goes directly to the point. But audiences for over four hundred years have preferred Shakespeare's roundabout way of saying that—

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.